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prayer machine: an introduction

Charles Hirschkind

The short essays collected here offer a set of empirical explorations of diverse technical devices employed in contexts of prayer. These “machines” perform a variety of different functions, including enabling religious adherents to acquire greater skill in the execution of prayer, extending the scope and force of prayerful acts, and scientifically objectifying and measuring the neuroanatomy of test subjects during prayer. Encompassing a heterogeneity of histories, religious traditions, and material apparatuses, these pieces contribute to a growing body of scholarship on the materialities of religious practice and their epistemic and ethical significance across diverse traditions. The contributors approach this theme, however, from a unique vantage point, or conceptual terrain: namely, that articulated by the uncanny figure of the prayer machine.

What is a prayer machine? The term conjures up the image of a fantastical device born of an early modern fascination with the wonders of mechanism, or a mysterious Chinese invention discovered by nineteenth-century orientalists (see Andy Blanton’s contribution below). Our interest in prayer machines, however, owes not to the historical curiosity they evoke, but to the way they highlight and condense a set of questions regarding the religious subject – or what might be called the theology of subjectivity more generally – in its variable relations to technicity and machinery.

While these questions have been powerfully configured by the modern concept of religion, an

early and partial figuration of one key issue can be traced back as far back as the Greek notion of *deus ex machina*. Within ancient Greek tragic drama, *deus ex machina* referred to the convention of using a device, such as a crane or a hidden door in the floor of the stage, to produce the striking entrance of a god onto the scene (Figure 1). The spectacular arrival was meant to engender awe and astonishment among the audience, emotional responses that intensified the morally edifying impact of the play. Already at the time, critics of this practice, including Aristotle, argued that recourse to a *deus ex machina* to resolve a seemingly insoluble crisis in the action of a play vitiated the performance inasmuch as it introduced a contrivance external to the plot itself. While the machine enabled the powerful and morally edifying presence of the divine, its artificiality and exteriority in relation to the human drama meant that it could never be integrated thoroughly into the story, even in a context where the unpredictable interventions of Gods and Goddesses into human affairs was unexceptional. In this early conjunction of religion and the machine, the technical device intensifies the human experience of divinity but deprives it of a good deal of reality as it remains intractably external to the contours of human life.

During the late renaissance one finds a distinct but related ambivalence around the conjunction of the religious and the mechanical in the ambition to construct talking statues and other speaking machines in order to reproduce the oracular voices of the ancients. Emerging at the intersection of natural magic and the scientific field of acoustics, this ambition reflected both a religious fascination with ancient accounts of the Greek oracles and an enlightenment aim to reveal the artifice behind priestly powers of voice and vocal subterfuge. In other words, the mechanical speaking puppets of early modern Europe embodied both the dream of the divine voice as well as the ambition to reveal its duplicity (see Schmidt 2000). The prayer machine, in short, is a child of the conceptual fault lines binding and dividing the religious and the mechanical over this very long history.

While a good deal of scholarship has emerged in recent years on the historical coupling of humans and machines, prayer provides a unique vantage point from which to explore such conjunctions. As a moment within religious life when the adherent may become radically individualized, turning to the divine in the transparency and singularity of the soul, acts of prayer unveil the self before the illuminating scrutiny of the divine. Indeed, prayer has long provided

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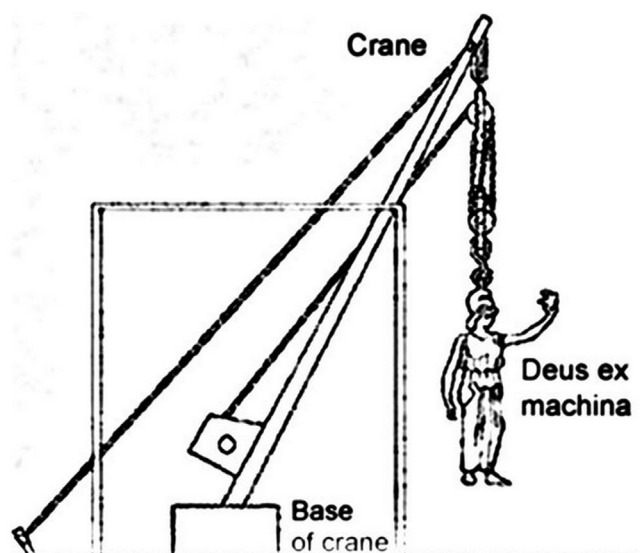


FIG 1
Theater sketch for "Deus ex machina".

a captivating image for theological reflection on individuality within Western modernity. In Webb Keane's work on the colonial formation of Sumbanese Christianity, for example, tensions at the core of Protestant accounts of subjectivity and agency – tensions he identifies as paradigmatic of broader Western discourses on the modern self – become sharpened and intensified precisely around acts of prayer (Keane 2007). Within this devotional context, the modernist norm that material forms (primarily semiotic ones, in Keane's account) be subordinated to immaterial meanings is worked out, as part of what Bruno Latour has called the process of purification by which borders between the human and non-human are continuously posited while being simultaneously overcome (Latour 1993). Keane's observations on Sumbanese prayer resonate with a broader colonial discourse that identified non-Western religious practices – and prayer in particular – as too mechanical, too entrapped within their own material and grammatical forms to accede to the higher plane of spirit Europeans saw in their own religious traditions.

The short essays that follow engage this conceptual terrain of the prayer machine from distinct historical vantage points and across distinct lines of inquiry. In doing so, they contribute to an analysis of the machine – whether as figure or apparatus – in fashioning diverse traditions of faith, knowledge, and practice.

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